

Fairfax County, Virginia

HOMELESS OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

**ANNUAL MESSAGE TO THE
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

March 15, 2004

Peyton Whiteley, Chair
Jewell Mikula, Vice-Chair

Homeless Oversight Committee

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to the

Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

Presented by Peyton Whiteley, Chair,
and Jewell Mikula, Vice-Chair, of the
Homeless Oversight Committee

Good morning, Chairman Connolly and members of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and County Executive Griffin. Thank you for the opportunity to present this Message, which we anticipate will be our last--from the Homeless Oversight Committee. No, we have not eliminated homelessness, but the community is preparing a more inclusive and potentially more effective structure for addressing affordable housing issues.

A YEAR OF PROGRESS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Three years ago in our Annual Message, the Committee endorsed the Report of the Emergency Housing Committee and requested the Board to give priority to three most critical needs: development of a fourth family shelter, adding beds for victims of domestic violence and preparing a strategic plan to better coordinate delivery of services for the medically vulnerable homeless.

DEVELOPMENT OF A FOURTH FAMILY SHELTER SERVING FAMILIES IN WESTERN AND CENTRAL FAIRFAX

We want to publicly thank Chairman Connolly for his leadership and personal efforts, as a member of the Board, to identify a critical source of funding from the private sector to make possible construction of a family shelter, serving central and western Fairfax County. We also want to acknowledge former Chairman Hanley and the members of the Board who supported funding for this initiative in a very difficult budgetary environment. County Executive Griffin and members of his staff deserve praise and recognition for the task of locating surplus County property for the shelter, completing assembly of the funding needed and engaging in a constructive dialogue with the community where the shelter will be located.

Location of a homeless shelter, as with location of affordable housing, can be a very challenging issue for the community to understand and endorse. The planning process implemented for the fourth shelter involved some spirited discussion about the location selected, but what was remarkable about the public hearings—even for residents with concerns about the location—was near unanimity in recognizing the need for the facility and their expression of support for the County in taking action to meet this critical human service. There are many people who could be singled out for their participation in this planning process, but in the interest of time we would like to specifically commend Supervisor McConnell and all of the appointees in the Springfield and Sully Districts' planning groups who received citizen input and helped shape and improve the County staff's plans to develop an appropriate facility. The overwhelming support expressed for the homeless shelter reflects the excellent job that has been done by Fairfax County: locating small facilities, run by non-profit organizations, with effective local community input into their operation. The addition of this shelter will complete a network serving the entire

County, and meaningfully reduce the unacceptable situation of maintaining waiting lists for entrance to emergency shelter.

EXPANSION OF SERVICES FOR HOMELESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS

The second priority identified in our 2001 Annual Message was a critical need for additional beds for victims of domestic violence and their children. There has been some progress, although more must be done to complete development of the additional 36 beds that were identified in the 2000 assessment of needs. One significant development worth noting is the creation of the Fairfax County Domestic Violence Prevention, Policy and Coordinating Council. Establishment of the Council, following a planning process supported by the Board, we believe will meaningfully help develop a better, coordinated response to this terrible issue of domestic violence. The shelter needs of domestic violence victims will be best addressed as part of a well-planned, coordinated response by the community to this specific cause of dislocation.

THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF MEDICALLY FRAGILE HOMELESS PERSONS

The third priority recommendation from the Homeless Oversight Committee was endorsed by the Board in directing establishment of the Special Committee on Medically Fragile Homeless Persons. The Special Committee, under leadership of Marlene Blum, is proceeding to identify "best practices" from around the country that Fairfax may consider, and to identify the highest priority shelter needs and most effective service delivery methods for medically vulnerable individuals and families. We look forward to the Special Committee reporting later this year with its analysis and recommendations.

THE 10 FOR 10 COMMUNITY CHALLENGE

Last year in our Annual Message we issued a challenge to the Board to undertake individually and collectively an active involvement in preservation and development of affordable housing in the community. The Board accepted the challenge and members have been working to meet, or we hope even to exceed, the goal of 10 additional affordable housing units in each district. We have shared with Board members information about the affordable housing projects under development throughout the County. The map prepared by the County Department of Housing and Community Development displays the geographic diversity of affordable housing, scattered throughout the County. Locating affordable housing as close as possible to where entry-level jobs exist is critical to our continuing economic development and to success in moving residents into private employment. While the 10 unit goal we suggested was intentionally modest, we hope it has helped highlight both the need for more affordable housing and the need to have these units located throughout Fairfax. At the conclusion of the challenge this coming June, we want to help get the recognition the members of the Board deserve for their successful leadership in implementing the challenge.

The County's systems of coordinated eviction prevention services, shelters for families and individuals in dire need and transitional housing units can only work and efficiently achieve the purposes of the Continuum of Care if there is an adequate supply of permanent affordable housing. We were heartened by Chairman Connolly's remarks in taking office, establishing affordable housing as a top priority. The families who are homeless now and those who are at risk of becoming homeless look for your continuing leadership on this most difficult issue. We wish there were more commitment or help from the federal and state governments to accomplish this.

THIS YEAR'S REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

We are dismayed to learn that the budget proposed for the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development would substantially reduce funding for the Section 8 Choice Voucher program. The Bush Administration's proposal submitted to Congress could, if enacted, potentially result in adversely impacting as many as 375 families in Fairfax County. This would not just be a human tragedy for the people directly affected, but would overwhelm the coordinated local services for the homeless, that are already insufficient to cope with the demands for temporary and permanent housing. The Administration's proposal encourages local agencies to target housing assistance for higher-income families, to spread subsidies more widely. The reality of this proposal is a shift of the burden to local governments, to spend more resources helping low-income families who need help the most and who are more expensive to assist. Reducing the federal financial role unfairly burdens local government with yet another under-funded mandate.

We call on the Board to contact each of our Congressman and Senators to identify for them the adverse local impact of the HUD budget proposal; and, to ask for their support for continued, full funding of the existing commitment of the Section 8 Choice Voucher program for low-income families. Higher income families need housing assistance as well, but higher income families are the ones who can most likely be served by creative governmental, non-profit and private sector strategies. The low-income families needing deep subsidies call for the greater resources of the federal government. While more federal support for permanent, affordable housing is needed, any substantial reduction in commitment to this critical need for low-income families is an unacceptable shift of mandate for housing assistance to state and local governments that are already heavily burdened with addressing other critical, unmet needs. Federal financial

participation in affordable housing remains a critical element. We ask the Board to support our request to Congress to Leave No Low-Income Homeless Children Behind, in preserving the federal commitment to affordable housing.

REPLACEMENT OF THE HOMELESS OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE WITH A BROADER COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESS FOR COORDINATION OF SERVICES AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAMS

In July, 1991 the Homeless Policy Implementation Task Force submitted a Report: Strategies For Serving The Homeless in Fairfax County. The first recommendation of the Task Force was for the County to create a Homeless Strategies Oversight Committee. The Board adopted the recommendation, and the Homeless Oversight Committee over the last twelve years has helped highlight the needs of families and individuals, worked with County staff to maximize federal financial support for local service delivery and has encouraged coordination of planning through what has become known as the Continuum of Care. There have been many accomplishments, implementing other recommendations of the 1991 Task Force. Perhaps most notable has been creation of the County's Coordinated Services Planning staff, who work with individuals and families threatened with loss of housing to obtain community help and County services, as appropriate.

While both the Homeless Oversight Committee and the planning process of the Continuum of Care have had success we cannot rest on past accomplishments. Different resource challenges require up-dating the County's approach to meeting the needs of the homeless. The community has engaged in a planning process to identify the best possible local structure to put in place to respond to changes that have occurred at the federal level. HUD has shifted its focus for funding homeless services to a priority for ending chronic

homelessness by 2012. To be most successful in competing for federal funding, the community believes a broader planning process, that will also build in greater accountability for gauging the effectiveness of local programs, will insure a better opportunity to secure the maximum possible federal support. Equally important is the need to involve private business representatives in the process to preserve and develop permanent affordable housing. We anticipate that the community representatives who have been studying a formal combination of the Homeless Oversight Committee and the Continuum of Care planning group will be ready to report to the Board later this spring on a new structure.

We conclude this final Annual Report with much gratitude to the present and former members of the Board who have given their attention, and most importantly, their support for our community's efforts to reduce homelessness in Fairfax. This effort has been and remains a partnership between the community and the County. Many challenges remain, but we wish to express our thanks to the Board of Supervisors, the County Executive, the Deputy County Executive for Human Services, County staff and the many members of the community who have made possible our progress.

Thank you for your attention and continuing support.

FACTS

- Homelessness has remained consistently high during the past six years:

Year	1999	1,789 total homeless
Year	2000	2,013 total homeless
Year	2001	1,935 total homeless
Year	2002	2,067 total homeless
Year	2003	1,944 total homeless
Year	2004	1,926 total homeless

- A survey conducted on January 21, 2004, of all known homeless county residents identified a homeless population of 1,926: 816 single individuals, and 412 adults with 698 children in 325 homeless families. Families were slightly smaller this year, with the average size dropping from 3.5 to 3.4. These numbers do not account for families and individuals at risk of homelessness who are temporarily housed in doubled or tripled housing situations.
- The waiting list for the family shelters continued to average 55 - 65 families or more during the past year, but these shelters can only accommodate about 35 families at one time. It still takes an average of three months to get into a family shelter. The new west County family shelter will help to address this need.
- The County has continued to house a limited number of families in motels. This is an expensive and undesirable alternative to shelter, but may be the only option available in a crisis.
- The number of homeless single individuals is up slightly by 6.1%. The housing challenges for working singles and persons with disabilities are daunting. Rent for an efficiency apartment increased by 4.7% to \$840 in January 2003, with only 1270 such units available, a decrease of 91 from January 2002.
- The overall cost of market housing in rental complexes has remained high. The two-bedroom rent was \$1,222 in January 2003, while the overall average rent increased by 1.0% to \$1,168 and the overall vacancy rate was 5.6%. Although availability of units has improved slightly overall, most of these are newer units with higher rents. There continues to be a tight market for more affordable units.
- There is mixed news in the County's Housing Choice Voucher Program. The program has continued to be fully leased up since October 2002, but the lack of additional vouchers during the past year meant that homeless families in shelters and transitional housing could not readily move to permanent stable housing. This has just begun to change in the past two months. However, the proposed FY 2005 changes in the federal program could *reduce* the funds available to provide housing assistance for up to 375 households in Fairfax County.